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ABSTRACT

Women, especially black women, may be the primary "change agents" in institutions in the 1980s. Women in education should distinguish between women's equity and the need to reform educational institutions to equip them to serve urban, ethnically diverse populations. The crisis in American society and the inappropriateness of its educational, religious, and political institutions indicate the need to change the institutions and, in education, the need to purge such rationalizations for low achievement as low intelligence quotients (I.Q.) or low social class. Given education's need for leadership, as well as the reduction in the number of women administrators, women administrators in education need to have above-average sensibility (that is, perception of surrounding conditions) and need to see the systemic nature of education's problems. For 5 years the author's personal responsibility has been running the East Oak Cliff Subdistrict of the Dallas (Texas) Independent School District. The subdistrict has experienced improvement in achievement, discipline, and parent and community relations, and has used the assumptions that black and poor children can learn in a culturally pluralist, success-oriented instruction model. The subdistrict's programs are based on emphases involving school climate, skills mastery, and community outreach. (RW)

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RETHINKING LEADERSHIP MODELS

PERSPECTIVES OF AN ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT

IN A PREDOMINATELY BLACK SUBDISTRICT

BY

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The struggle for freedom, equality, and justice has reached a different plateau. Just as minorities and third world activists were the primary actors during the 60's, women seem to be the primary actors -- and I might add, powerful resources for change -- in the 80's. Much of that fervor was gained from the Civil Rights movement and we shall hope that women of all ideologies and persuasions may see themselves working together as an undauntable force for change between now and the 21st century.

As we think of new and emerging leadership styles and models, Geraldine Rickman perceived, in the spring of 1974, that the womans' movement and the Black movement might forge a new alliance. She wrote in the Civil Rights Digest:

> Black women can become 21st century change agents -- forming a linking-pin (Likert Model) relationship with white women -- white men -- and Black men; primarily because Black women have multiple and overlapping relationships.

By "change agent" she refers to those persons who desire to participate in, and often instigate, institutional change processes, through strategic risk-taking and calculated planning. She also includes among "change agents" those persons who are called upon to work and live in vanguard positions in order to model new behaviors that affect persons and institutions.

Whether or not we -- who are Black -- can be that pivotal, only time will tell. But history does tell that the Black woman has a legacy that is extremely rich and varied. Our history did not begin with slavery in the colonies but dates back millions of years in Africa. History has called the African woman the Mother of Civilization and has numerous accounts to support her distinguished role. Black queens such as Cleopatra, Sheba, and Nefertari ruled brilliantly during the antiquity of Ethiopia.

From that beginnning and through the travail of slavery and exploitation, we have learned to endure, to suffer, to bleed, to forgive, to hope, to work, to transcend. If we are able to make a substantive contribution in our time, it will be because more than anything else we have become transcendant.

EQUITY

The race and gender of persons in positions of authority are not singularly important elements when that which they are presiding appears to be in the demise of public education.

Women must be explicitly clear on the fact that they plan for that improvment to occur in the urban centers where the waste of human potential is the greatest - where achievement is abysmally low - where student needs are the most profound and where excellence in administration and teaching are the rare exceptions and not the rule. While I believe in equity, I

am persuaded that ethnic nor gender distinction of themselves will make a qualitative difference. Equity representation is critical- and it may be helpful - but it is to be clearly differentiated from reforming educational institutions. The contemporary institutions are inappropriate for the vast numbers of their constitutents. As women acknowledge this truth they will recognize its special ramifications for the hordes of children in the public schools and their responsibility for involvement in and reform of the schools. It should be clear to even the casually involved that either the public schools will equip themselves tc serve an ethnically diverse population or there will be no public schools.

PERSONAL VS. INSTUTIONAL ISSUES

The fact that our cultural oppression is indigenous to American life means that we must look to ourselves to find resolution. We are now at a decline in every sphere of organized life. We need a new kind of person for watershed experiencing which is present in our national life: Ecology, Education, Politics, Religion. The poisoning of our environment and fear of nuclear holocaust; the retreat from public schools and urban centers by those financially able to afford options; the seige of decadence among political leaders evidenced by Watergate and Abscam scandals; and the moral/spiritual bankruptcy apparent in our national psyche lead us to recognition that the institutions of American society are crumbling. The educational, religious, and political institutions which have long been the basis for the survival of the nation are no longer appropriate for all of our people.

One of our major tasks lies in developing a cadre of educational leaders informed about the nature of institutions, of systems and sub-systems. Women have the hurculean task of ridding the institutions, particularly the institution of the school, of the inaccurate and immoral data which we transmit daily to the young, Reinhold Neihbur has said: "It is more Important to change institutions than to change the hearts of men." Institutions are the great acculturators. They shape for us our perceptions, our expectations, our aspirations - even our appreciations. Daily we manage the institutions with racist, sexist, elitist practices. Daily we behave in racist, sexist, elitist ways.

It is we the educators who have conceptualized and rationalized the low achievement and climate of education of such euphemisms.

.Low I.Q.
.Low social class
.Weak ego strength
.Lack of father image
.Matriarchial domination
.Etc, Etc, the litany goes on

It is now our responsibility to purge our minds, and eventually, the collective societal mindset, of such myths and to replace them with an ideology of change and affirmation.

LEADERSHIP

In the February issue of Educational Leadership, Gordon Cawelti differentiates between leadership and sheer administration. Leadership, he says, implies providing a vision or sense of direction. Management, on the other hand, deals with the more clinical functions of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Training is required for leaders to gain facility in both areas: in leader behavior and in management skills.

That same journal carried an article by Vonzetta Campbell which makes the issue of leadership particularly critical for women in general and women of color in particular. She cites the research of Freedman (1980) which notes that there are fewer female administrators now than there were a decade ago. If that is the case, then we must realize that the future is not as predictably positive as some may have previously thought.

As we see the gains women have made being reduced due to decentralization, budget cuts, and decreasing enrollments, it suggests that we will need to become a new breed of women who are equipped to meet the challenges of this age. Campbell warns us that the female leader of this day must be especially astute because: "Discrimination and bias are going further underground and detection is becoming more and more difficult."

The dilemma is graphically described in an arresting article called "A Cry for Leadership" in which Ortega y Gasset wrote:

> Before long there will be heard throughout the planet a formidable cry, rising like the howling of innumerable dogs to the stars, asking for someone or something to take command.

If women are to be those answering the call, they must do so with a finesse and perception not evident in previous leadership behaviors.

The woman -- the new woman — must enlighten herself with above average sensibility. I choose the word sensibility carefully because its meaning encompasses a very significant quality which each of us must heighten in ourselves and in our associates.

Sensibility refers to a distinct ability to perceive the status of surrounding conditions -- not just the obvious, readily observable conditions, but also those more subtle, unexpressed feelings which produce innuendo and double entente. An important aspect of sensibility is also that ability to see the big picture -- to detach oneself from personal opinion and time and place in order to see the structure of the whole and the overarching trends and possible ramifications. Such sensibility requires keen intellectual perception accompanied by mental and emotional response to the impressions received.

Much too frequently we as women have busied ourselves with acquisition of the accouterments of status, and with personalities, with power and with delusions of power while failing to engage ourselves in analysis of the more critical issues related to institutional reform.

An important aspect of our education and retooling must include an understanding of the systemic nature of the problems which confront us.

In Beyond Culture, Edward Hall reminds us that if we are going to transcend the system, we have to first know that there is a system and -- secondly, we have to know the nature of that system. To be at all effective, the new woman must understand that our problems are not personal, not individual; they are systemic. Anyone who cannot understand and address issues within a systemic framework is, by default, a part of systems maintenance.

We must acknowledge, as women and ethnic minorities, that many of us are coming into the arena when there is little power left -- the economic bases are depleted, status is transitory, and deficits abound growing out of centuries of miseducation -- and inequities are burdens to be borne by emerging leadership. In some cases, it may be too late. But if the philosopher Hegel were right, and if the owl of Minerva does appear at dusk, perhaps we may be able to assist in saving public education and saving ourselves and our society in the process. If that is to occur, many of us will need to abandon the model in which we focus on our personal encounters and frustrations as we take positions which challenge the norms and attempt to establish new standards and practices based on new information and a new ideology.

That is a daily reality for me as I serve as the only Black woman among a group of five Associate Superintendents. Because I am Black and female I am accustomed to those personal conflicts, but I recognize that the greater issue is the degree to which institutional reform is accomplished.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

My own personal responsibility for the last five years has been as Associate Superintendent of a subdistrict created by Court Order to provide creative and effective alternatives of educational programming for over 25,000 Black students. Since that time I have seen a number of successes including:

- Rapidly improving student achievement
- Drastically reduced suspensions and corporal punishment
- Actively functioning parent and community groups in partnership with the schools

That is not to say that the experience has been without travail, misunderstanding, and difficulty. If I were not Brown, I would be able to show you the bruises on my body. It is now particularly challenging as our subdistrict is being conjoined with another and my new assignment will bring me into the Superintendent's office to monitor districtwide desegregation. One of the first tasks I assigned myself when I accepted the superintendency of Dallas' East Oak Cliff Subdistrict was delineation and communication of three basic assumptions by staff and I would make about the 99% Black student body of nearly 26,000 pupils for whom we bear responsibility.

1. The first assumption identified was that Black students and students of limited economic resources, as all children, have equal ability to learn, excluding those who are neurologically impaired.
2. Our second assumption is that a culturally pluralistic perspective, rather than a cultural deficit perspective, should obtain.

3. The third assumption we share is the belief that a sequentially-based and success-oriented model of instruction is basic to student growth.

The special mission of this time has to be that of education with full regard for the political implications of the color of its constituents. Free public education is the only unique and essential variable in public life. That institution, more than any other, has been responsible for the progress or hindrance of progress in American life. It has provided the major vehicle for potential mobility for the poor and/or for minorities. Therefore, the preservation of the public schools is vital.

The East Oak Cliff Governance Model is the primary vehicle being used to plan and monitor the efficacy of our efforts in the East Oak Cliff Subdistrict. The model is used by principals, resource persons, and other building level administrators as a process for change. Written reports are made to my office each quarter and subsequent conferences are held with principals based on their reports.

Each of our programs and activities falls under the rubric of one of three major thrusts we have identified to give us some sense of direction and consistency across the Subdistrict. Those thrusts are:

I. Creating a school/community climate which affirms education and affirms the Black, Brown, Red and Yellow experiences in tandem with the Euro-American experience.
II. Implementing a more effective delivery system to ensure mastery of the basic academic and social skills.
III. Developing a community outreach and involvement program which maximizes the home/school partnership.

When the Black orator, Frederick Douglass, warned our people years ago that "If there is no struggle, there is no progress," he spoke words as true now as they were in that earlier day.

Black people know better than most the meaning of Michelle Wallace's words:

> The history of the period has been written and will continue to be written without us. The imperative is clear. Either we will make history (thusly molding the future) or remain the victims of it.

It is the explicit task of the new woman to conceptualize, operationalize, and institutionalize the best that we can offer.

Women must establish new linkages -- and women must continue to develop new levels of critical, creative thought. Progress in the struggle is directly related to progress in thought.

A product of thought will surely be the enlightenment which obviates the penetrating message by Warren Cuney as he wrote of the Black woman in his poem, "No Images:"

She does not know
her beauty
She thinks her brown body
has no glory.
If she could dance
naked,
under palm trees
and see her image in the river
she would know
But there are no palm trees
on the street
and dishwater gives back no images.

With new images honed by experience; informed by new knowledge, skills and values; and directed by consciousness of the fragility of our existence on this planet -- we may know our beauty, we may know our own glory, and we may even - perchance - establish a new frontier in urban education.